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ABSTRACT

This study compared students' and professors' perceptions of the ethicalness of faculty behavior. A total of 115 professors and 157 undergraduate students at a medium-sized public Midwestern university completed a 16-item faculty behavior scale adapted from Tabachnick and colleagues (1991) work. Significant differences between student and faculty responses were found on 7 of the 16 faculty behaviors. Faculty saw ensuring popularity with easy tests, sexual involvement with a student, accepting a textbook rebate, and profanity in lectures as more unethical than did students, while students saw the breaking of a confidence, the use of old lecture notes, and the teaching of unmastered material as more unethical than did faculty. Focus groups were conducted with 38 students and 19 faculty and 10 faculty were interviewed. The five major themes generated by the student groups were: (1) favoritism toward individuals, or groups; (2) poor treatment of students or lack of respect toward students; (3) imposing personal or political beliefs on students; (4) prejudging or stereotyping students, and (5) use of profanity. Faculty groups identified the following themes: (1) responsibility toward students; (2) power issues with students; (3) hypocrisy within the institution; (4) lack of institutional role in ethical awareness; and (5) professional misconduct. It is suggested that institutions should play a larger role in promoting discussions about ethics in academics. (Contains 14 references.) (MDM)

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Students' and professors' views on the ethics of faculty behavior

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Abstract

Differences in professors' and students' perceptions of the ethicalness of faculty behavior were examined quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative sample consisted of 115 professors and 157 undergraduates. Respondents completed 16 items regarding faculty behavior adapted from Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, and Pope (1991). Faculty and students differed significantly on 7 of the 16 behaviors. For example, faculty saw sexual relations with a student as more unethical than did the undergraduates. The students viewed teaching related practices (failing to update notes, teaching unmastered material) as more unethical than did the faculty. The qualitative measures included focus groups and interviews with 38 students and 29 faculty. Students focused on daily kinds of classroom interactions whereas faculty tended to focus on more macro issues. It is suggested that institutions should play a larger role in promoting discussions about ethics in academia.

Students' and professors' views on the ethics of faculty behavior

Considerable attention has been paid to ethical issues in higher education (e.g. Alexander, 1986; Finn, 1989; Robinson & Moulton, 1985; Thompson, 1991; Wilshire, 1990). Professional associations, such as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 1987), and the American Psychological Association (APA, 1990), have issued responsibility standards which apply to their general membership and special rules which cover the unique situations which confront their academic professionals. Despite the many "shades of grey" involved in ethical standards, there has been relatively little empirical research on ethical issues in academia (Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, & Pope, 1991). In particular, little has been done on students' perceptions of faculty behavior. Indeed, despite the fact that many institutions are involved in ethical sensitivity training for staff and students (e.g. Ames & Eskridge, 1992; Drucker & Drucker, 1994; Hogan & Kimmel, 1992), most of the research attention has been on student ethical transgressions such as cheating (e.g., Roig & Ballew, 1994).

A specific survey of ethical problems in higher education was conducted by Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, and Pope (1991) who utilized a 63 item questionnaire that asked faculty to identify and rank certain potential ethical issues. Although their study was limited to academic psychologists, research on ethical issues involved in teaching per se suggests that many of the themes are generalizable across disciplines (Keith-Spiegel, Wittig, Perkins,

Balogh, & Whitley, 1993). In a related follow-up, Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, and Allen (1993) culled 51 items from their original work and explored students' views of professors' actions. Unfortunately, due to differences in the response scales used, student and faculty statistical comparisons could not be made directly. However, there was indication that faculty and students were similar on most of the items.

The present study directly compares faculty and student perceptions of faculty behavior using items from Tabachnick et al.'s (1991) work. It was expected that agreement would be high for faculty and students. Additionally, the present study adds a qualitative exploration of differences and similarities in faculty and students' perceptions of ethics in academia.

Quantitative Methods and Results

Procedure

Faculty (N = 115) and students (N = 157) at a medium-sized public Midwestern university were sampled. In the Spring of 1995, questionnaires were mailed to a randomly selected sample of 234 faculty members (representing half of the entire faculty). The 115 responses represent a response rate of 49%. Students were solicited in the Fall of 1995 from an introductory psychology course which meets a general education requirement. They received course credit for their participation. To insure that the students had reasonable familiarity with university life, they were required to have completed at least two semesters of college.

Respondents were asked to indicate how ethical/unethical they perceived a list of 16 faculty behaviors to be. The items were selected from a larger list of issues developed by Tabachnick et al. (1991) and focused primarily on student-teacher relationships and professional ethical issues for college teachers. Items which showed promise for large variance and which appeared to be appropriate across disciplines were selected a priori. Respondents were given a 5-point scale with which to respond to the items. The scale ranged from 1 "unquestionably not ethical" to 5 "unquestionably ethical." Consequently, the lower the score, the more a behavior is viewed as unethical.

Sample Characteristics

Faculty. Of the 115 faculty respondents, 62% were male and 38% were female. The median age was 47 and the age range was 28-63. Ninety-six percent of the sample was Caucasian, 2% was Asian American and 2% was African American. The majority of the faculty were from a college of liberal arts (62%), 12% were from the college of business, and an additional 25% were from colleges of science, health/physical education. Respondents indicated that, on average, they spend 81% of their workload on teaching related activities.

Students. Of the 157 student respondents, 94 were female (60%) and 63 were male (40%). The median age was 19 and the age range was 18-28. Ninety-two percent of the sample was Caucasian, 3% African American, 3% Native American, and 1% Hispanic. Seventy percent of the sample were sophomores and the remaining

30% were juniors or seniors. The students represented a cross-section of majors with 30% in liberal studies, 23% in physical education/health, 17% in the sciences, 14% in business, and 13% undeclared.

Results

In contrast to expectation, significant differences were found on 7 out of the 16 faculty behaviors. To adjust for the use of multiple t-tests, differences were not considered significant unless they achieved the probability level of .005 or better.

Table 1 shows the mean score on each behavior for the faculty and student samples. Of the seven which yielded a difference, four behaviors were seen as more unethical by faculty than by students. Faculty saw ensuring popularity with easy tests (t = -5.04, p = <.001), sexual involvement with a student (t = -2.91, p = <.01), accepting a textbook rebate (t = -5.14, p = <.001), and profanity in lectures (t = -6.68, p = <.001) as more unethical than did the student sample.

An additional three items were seen as more unethical by students than by faculty. Students saw the breaking of confidence (t = 2.85, p = <.01), the use of old lecture notes (t = 3.66, p = <.001), and the teaching of unmastered material (t = 2.89, p = <.01) as more unethical than did faculty.

Qualitative Methods and Results

Student Focus Groups

Focus groups were held with 38 students (18 men, 20 women) in groups of approximately 10. Participants were primarily sophomores from a wide range of majors and were limited to students who had completed at least two semesters of college. One male and one female senior psychology majors facilitated the groups. To generate discussion respondents were given the following prompt:

> The occupation of college professor is composed of daily interactions with students. It also entails other pursuits such as research and associations with other faculty. What the university faculty does may meet with disapproval from students like yourselves. Think about professors' behaviors which are associated with their job that you view as morally wrong or unethical.

Faculty focus groups

Nineteen faculty (13 men and 6 women) participated in two focus groups of approximately 10 participants each. The groups ranged in composition from assistant to full professors and varied across disciplines and experience. The groups were facilitated by two female faculty members. Faculty were given two prompts to think about in order to generated discussion.

1. In what ways do you think the University environment promotes ethical behavior of its members? In what ways does it discourage ethical behavior?

2. What you think are the key ethical issues in academia today?

Faculty interviews

An additional ten faculty members (6 men and 4 women) participated in in-depth interviews.

Qualitative Results

The five major themes generated by the students (focus groups) are listed below.

1. Favoritism toward individuals or groups.
2. Poor treatment of students or lack of respect toward students.
3. Imposing personal or political beliefs on students.
4. Prejudging or stereotyping students.
5. Use of profanity.

The five major themes generated by the faculty (focus groups and interviews) are listed below.

1. Responsibilities toward students.
2. Power issues with students.
3. Hypocrisy within the institution.
4. Lack of institutional role in ethical awareness.
5. Professional misconduct.

Discussion

The results indicate interesting patterns of differences between faculty and students. Students appeared to be more concerned about the quality of teaching and the classroom interactions than were faculty. For example, students viewed

failure to update lecture notes and not mastering material as more unethical than faculty did. Faculty, on the other hand, were more concerned about institutional issues such as the role of academia in fostering ethical awareness, hypocrisy within the institution and power issues with students. Both groups, in separate venues, expressed concern about profanity in the classroom. Overall, there were more differences between students and faculty than previous research would suggest.

The findings suggest that students are understandably naive about issues from an institutional perspective but are very concerned what happens to them in the classroom from both a personal and educational perspective. Faculty deal with ethical issues on a daily basis but some are also able to abstract their daily activities to see the larger theoretical issues involved in the ethics of academia. Faculty appear to be grappling with these issues alone. There was little evidence of organized support for the discussion and potential resolution of ethical dilemmas. The differences between faculty and students understandably reflect issues salient to each constituency. However, it must be noted that for the quantitative items, most of the behaviors were seen as unethical by both faculty and students and differed only in degree. Additionally, the student and faculty focus groups received different prompts which likely affected the content of their concerns.

Future research would benefit from the use of more advanced students as respondents and more diverse pools of both faculty

and students. Research into student perceptions of faculty behavior can inform ethics training for faculty and students and may affect the type of material introduced at student orientations to university life. Overall, the research suggests that both faculty and students would benefit from institutions taking a more active role in promoting the discussion of the various facets of ethical issues in academia.

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Table 1

The 16 ethical issues in academia items[a] -- student and faculty comparisons

	Faculty Sample (N=115)		Student Sample (N=157)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
BEHAVIORS THAT FACULTY VIEWED AS MORE UNETHICAL				
1. Giving easy courses or tests to ensure your popularity with students.	1.33	.81	1.85*	.89
2. Becoming sexually involved with a student.	1.41	.78	1.72*	.98
3. Accepting for yourself a publisher's monetary rebate for adopting their text.	1.57	1.01	2.24*	1.14
4. Using profanity in lectures.	2.29	1.13	3.25*	1.20
BEHAVIORS THAT STUDENTS VIEWED AS MORE UNETHICAL				
5. Telling colleagues a confidential disclosure told to you by a student.	1.56	.72	1.32*	.62
6. Failing to update lecture notes when re-teaching a course.	2.58	1.11	2.10*	1.02
7. Teaching material you haven't really mastered.	2.62	1.04	2.26*	1.01

BEHAVIORS THAT DID NOT YIELD SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES

8. Ignoring strong evidence of cheating.	1.20	.55	1.39	.79
9. Teaching full time while "moonlighting" at least 20 hours per week.	2.66	1.24	2.94	1.09
10. Selling unwanted complimentary textbooks to used book vendors.	2.46	1.31	2.48	1.19
11. Allowing students to drop courses for reasons not officially approved.	2.56	1.06	2.79	1.19
12. Omitting significant information when writing a letter of recommendation for a student.	2.11	.88	2.00	.98
13. Insulting, ridiculing, etc. a student in his or her absence.	1.36	.68	1.35	.74
14. Ignoring unethical behavior by colleagues.	1.93	.88	1.77	.82
15. Allowing a student's "likability" to influence your grading.	1.51	.79	1.77	1.03
16. Grading on a strict curve regardless of class performance level.	2.42	1.25	2.13	1.05

' from Tabachnick, et al. (1991).
* Adjusting for multiple t-tests, differences considered significant at the $p < .005$ level.
Note: Ratings are on a 1-5 Likert-type scale.
The lower the number the more unethical the behavior.
Note: Items administered in the followed order:
8, 1, 9, 10, 2, 11, 12, 5, 6, 13, 3, 4, 7, 14, 15, 16.